FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE
FACILITATOR’S
MANUAL

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Part One

Introduction to Family Group Conferences
I. HISTORY OF FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES

New Zealand

The Family Group Conference model was developed in New Zealand and became mandatory in all cases of child abuse and neglect with the passing of The Child, Young Persons, and Their Families Act of 1989. The model was designed to be consistent with the historical family decision making practices of the indigenous Maori people and to provide blood-related family members with an opportunity to make their own decisions about the safety of their own children.

The development of the model and subsequent passage of the Act was in direct response to the outcry over the increasingly disproportionate number of Maori children in out-of-home care. These children were predominately placed into Caucasian homes often a great distance from their families and communities. In addition, the children were experiencing multiple placements and spending what was considered an exorbitant length of time residing in out of home care. Services provided the children and their families were thought by some to be racist (especially towards the Maoris). Moreover, there were virtually no Maori social workers.

The changes that have occurred within the child welfare system in New Zealand since passage of the Act have been numerous. Placement of children into the least restrictive setting has become the option of choice. Consequently, there has been a decrease in the use of foster home placements and institutions and an increase in the number of relative placements. In addition, an atmosphere of partnership in the protection of children has developed between families and professionals with the addition and acceptance of family decision-making.

In more recent years, the Family Group Conference model has been adopted by programs in Australia, Canada, England and the United States.

Washington State

In August of 1995, a project implementing New Zealand’s Family Group Conference model began in the Kent DCFS office. This year long project included the Ken office, the Seattle South office and Seattle’s Native American unit. Due to the success of the project, at year end the project was extended indefinitely with sole focus on the Kent office.

In March of 1996, six Family Group Conference Coordinators were hired to facilitate Family Group Conferences on a statewide basis. The Northwest Institute supervised this pilot project for Children and Families at the University of Washington. The project was
originally slated for a period of five months with the possibility of an additional five-month extension was granted and the project continued until December of 1997.

At the conclusion of the state pilot project, a number of Children’s Administration regions decided to allocate positions to family group conference facilitation, thereby making Family Group Conferences more readily available to social workers and families elsewhere in the state. Also, subsequent to the pilot project, Region Six, the Children’s Administration region encompassing the Olympic Peninsula, began developing a network of state and private agency coordinators. Family group conference facilitation has continued in this region with a unique blend of in house and contracted coordinators.

Team meetings are held on a monthly basis with all Family Group Conference coordinators in the state. Meeting regularly has allowed coordinators to develop practice, policy, program initiatives and data management systems from the ground up. Team meetings give coordinators a venue for problem solving implementation dilemmas and staffing cases. The team meeting has developed as an important aspect of FGC implementation, helping to insure that the FGC model is practiced consistently throughout the state. As the model has developed the team has become a collective resource for the rest of the state.
II. PHILOSOPHY

The traditional role of family has been to come to the aid of other family members when necessary and to ensure the care and protection of the children in the family. Before the days of Child Protective Services, responsibility fell exclusively on the shoulders of the family and their support networks (such as voluntary charitable organizations, religious institutions, neighbors and family friends).

As society has shifted and government agencies have assumed a larger and larger role in the protection of children, many extended families have either chosen to give up their traditional role to the government agencies or have found that they were excluded from the process despite their interest.

Family Group Conferences provide a structure that permits parents and their extended family the opportunity to assume a decision-making role and to take responsibility for developing a plan that will ensure the safety and protection of their children.

Family Group Conferences presume that the people most invested in protecting a child when child abuse or neglect has occurred, are the child’s family. Family has an emotional commitment that strangers, no matter how well meaning, can never have. Families are the people most familiar with the family structure, dynamics and decision-making practices. Finally, family members hold information that non-family members may never know – including family secrets which may directly correlate to whether the child is subject to further abuse or neglect.

In a Family Group Conference the family is seen as the “expert” on themselves. Consequently, when family members are recruited and included in the decision-making process and provided adequate information, they are in the best position to develop a plan that will ensure the care and protection of their children and to deal with family problems. No one is in a better position to know the dynamics and history of a family problem. No one is in a better position to know the strengths and the weaknesses of the family and who the safe caregivers will be. Family is best suited to figuring out what resources they can be counted on as well.
III. PRINCIPLES FOR PRACTICE

- Family Group Conferences must be voluntary on the part of the social worker and the family.

- The parents’ agreement to the conference must be based upon truly informed consent. This is also true for children 12 years of age and older.

- The family’s role as the primary decision-makers should be reinforced at every step.

- The impartiality and neutrality (real and perceived) of the facilitator is a key element in family’s feeling of autonomy and empowerment.

- Child safety and the safety of all participants is of paramount importance and concern.

- Preparation is a vital component to successful outcomes.

- The family should have all the necessary information they need to make informed decisions for their child/children.

- The family must have as much time as they need to meet in private to make decisions.

- The social worker must understand that if the plan meets the safety and protection needs of the child/children, they are obliged to agree to and implement the plan.
IV. FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES - THE THREE PARTS

Family Group Conferences bring together parents, extended family members, “fictive” kin, social workers, service providers, attorneys and any other significant people the family wishes to include. Family Group Conferences are voluntary and are held only with the consent of the parents and children over 12. Family Group Conferences are based on family strengths and parents are consulted during the planning, regarding who should be invited, location, food etc.

FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES ARE DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS:

PART I INFORMATION SHARING. Information about the case is shared with family. The social workers and other service providers discuss both the positives and the concerns about the family and how they relate to the safety and well being of the child(ren). The goal is to provide the family with as much information, as possible, about how the family became involved with the child welfare system and the current situation. It is important for family to hear all the information at the same time and to ask questions. Family members are not usually asked to provide information during this part. This is also the time for the social worker to let the family know if there are any plans they cannot accept, due to safety issues that relate to the children and then to address those issues in the plan.

PART II FAMILY PRIVATE TIME. Family meets alone without social workers or service providers. This gives them the opportunity to discuss the child’s needs and to create a plan that will ensure the child’s safety and well being. They are also asked to discuss the needs of the parents and any caregiver. The coordinator and social worker remain available to answer questions, but do not stay in the room. The family takes as long as needed. In spite of the often, emotional nature of the meetings, families create plans that meet the protection and safety needs of children.

PART III REVIEWING AND AGREEING ON THE PLAN. This is the final part of the Family Conference. Once the family has created their plan, they present it to the social worker. The social worker reviews the plan, with the family, to determine if it meets the health and safety needs of the child. The social worker may approve the plan, as is, or the family may be asked to consider changes to meet any remaining concerns if there is disagreement. Everyone receives a copy of the plan.
Family Group Conference: The Washington State Model

Family Agrees → SW Completes Referral → FGC Coordinator → Preparation → FGC (*Information Sharing, *Private Family Time, *Agreeing on Plans) → Monitoring (Family & Agencies) → Follow-up Meeting (If Family Requests) → Agency or Tribal Review
V. THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPARATION

Unlike many meetings where skillful facilitation is the most crucial component of a good outcome and a well-run meeting, the preparation phase of family group conference meetings, is the most critical element. While skillful facilitation is still very important when problems do occur they can usually be traced back to some aspect of preparation.

For most people, Family Group Conferencing constitutes a dramatically different way of planning for children. The idea of giving decision-making power to families is a foreign concept to many professionals and families members alike. A certain degree of skepticism or even fear is, therefore, natural.

Family members routinely question their own ability to come to an agreement as a family or to come up with a plan that they feel will satisfy the social worker. They often have concerns about family dynamics and how they have historically played out. Families who have had disagreements regularly take an ugly turn are reasonable to question the intelligence of assembling as a group and then meeting alone, especially when the topic of the meeting is so serious.

Many professionals and service providers understand their function in a traditional meeting in the context of their role as an “expert, a person who gives information and advice.” In a Family Group Conference, professionals and service providers are challenged to honor their role as a well informed and trained professional while refraining from giving advice. They are asked to share information surrounding the case but refrain from advice giving so that the family is allowed to sort the information for themselves and come to their own conclusions. This subtle but important shift change may be a minor change or it may mean giving up a more significant need to influence and control. Often it means suspending, for the sake of the meeting a long held conviction that professionals are the only ones in a position to make good case decisions.

For both groups of individuals, their role in a Family Group Conference represents a very different way of operating. Consequently, it is important that everyone is fully briefed about the meeting format, philosophy and their role in the meeting. For some, this may require several conversations, printed materials and asking numerous questions. However, the time spent preparing participants and addressing their concerns is essential to a family group conference that works.

Likewise, acquainting the larger group of stakeholders with the meeting’s goals/process can be key to the success of the overall program. Providing individuals within the law-enforcement and treatment communities, courts, etc. the opportunity to learn about family group conferencing, express their concerns up front and have those concerns taken into account, can reduce problems down the road and make them supporters of the model.
For an individual who has traditionally been a key player in the decision-making process, hearing second or third hand about a new method of doing things can cause anxiety and resentment. With no real knowledge of the process or the inspiration behind it, and with no opportunity afforded them to express their concerns or approval, it is natural for them to be put off - especially if the change appears to usurp some of their authority. Consequently, defense attorneys, Attorneys General, GALs, the courts and other influential stakeholders should all be made aware of the meeting process and given the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns.
Part Two

Arranging the Conference
VI. PRELIMINARY TASKS

The Referral Process

1. The social worker contacts the coordinator letting them know they have a possible referral.

2. The social worker completes the referral form and reviews it with the coordinator to assess the appropriateness of the referral.

3. The social worker is asked to provide an ISSP or an already written summary of the case. If that is not available the worker provides a more detailed explanation of the case which the coordinator records on the intake form.

4. In addition to having the social worker complete the referral form, the coordinator requests several potential meeting dates (at least 4 or 5) where the worker will be available for most of the day. It typically takes 2-3 weeks to plan a family group conference effectively.

5. The social worker is asked to speak with the parents to gain their preliminary consent to hold the meeting and to let the parents know that the coordinator will be calling. Children over 12 must give their consent as well.

Depending on the worker’s familiarity or comfort level explaining the model, preliminary consent may consist only of gaining the parent’s permission for the coordinator to call.

If the parent’s whereabouts are unknown or if the parent is unresponsive to repeated attempts to contact them by phone, it is appropriate to write the parent at the last known address notifying them of the referral and the voluntary nature of the meeting. Include a brochure and encourage them to contact you, but let them know that if they do not respond by a specific date you will assume consent and proceed in setting up the meeting. Send a copy of the letter to the parent’s attorney and to the caseworker. If a parent is truly “whereabouts unknown”, send the letter in care of their attorney. Absent a last known address or an attorney, it is appropriate to proceed with arranging the meeting without obtaining their consent. This may however, limit the amount of information the social worker can share regarding the parent(s) due to confidentiality considerations.

How To Determine Appropriate Referrals For Family Conferences

1. Most families involved with Child Welfare Services will benefit from a conference. Family group conferences are voluntary. Parents and children 12 and older, need to give permission before the coordinator starts contacting family members. Almost all
families with child welfare concerns agree to participate and make good plans for their children. It may be difficult to believe that the family can make the decisions necessary to keep children safe and sometimes family members feel the same way. However, almost all conferences result in plans that the social worker can agree with and plans that keep children safe.

Sex abuse and domestic violence cases must always include consultation from the social worker and supervisor and may include discussion with service providers. It is crucial that the coordinator ensure the safety of any victims, at the meeting. Domestic abuse cases can be held without the perpetrator present. That person can send a letter or participate by speakerphone if their presence would intimidate family members.

2. It is not appropriate for a coordinator to organize a Family Group Conference for a family they have worked with. It is imperative to the process that the coordinator remain as neutral as possible, to all family members. It is also important for family members to feel that the coordinator is neutral. This is difficult to do if the coordinator has had a previous case management or therapeutic relationship with the parent or other family member.
VII. OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT AND ASSISTANCE WITH PLANNING THE MEETING

Talking with Parents and Children (over age 12)

1. Discuss with each parent and child the format of the meeting detailing the three phases and what occurs in each.

2. Talk in general about the sort of individuals appropriate to participate in each of the phases.

3. Discuss the role of the social worker. Make sure the parent and child is aware that in the worker’s presentation, they will be providing a chronology of events pertaining to CPS involvement and discussing departmental concerns.

4. Talk about the role of the service providers and what kind of information they might be sharing, for example the nature of involvement, progress or compliance with services/recommendations, strengths and areas of concern.

5. Let them know that neither they nor their family are asked to share any information during the first phase of the meeting. They are, however, strongly encouraged to ask questions and get clarification on the information that is being shared.

6. Talk about the second part of the meeting and about the decision-making role of the parents and family.

7. Let the parents and child know that they, along with their family, will be meeting in private for as long as needed to come to agreement on a plan.

8. Let them know that the social worker and you (the coordinator) will not re-enter the room unless asked but will be available the entire time to answer questions.

9. Inform the parent and child of any bottom-line protection issues obtained from the social worker, or let them know that the social worker will be discussing bottom-line protection issues at the beginning of the meeting.

10. Let the parents and child know that in the third part of the meeting it will be the social worker’s responsibility to assess whether the family’s plan meets the safety and protection needs of the child.

While a family group conference shifts the decision-making responsibility to the family, the social worker is still (legally) responsible to assess and approve the plan. Sometimes this calls for negotiation and clarification before agreement can be reached.
11. Discuss the voluntary nature of the meeting. Let the parent and child know that if they do not want the meeting to occur it will not take place.

Make sure when the parent and child consents to the meeting it is informed consent. This may mean meeting with the parents or child in person to discuss the meeting in more detail.

Children younger than 12 may also be determined appropriate to attend the meeting, however, it is not necessary to obtain their consent for the meeting. A decision as to whether a child attends should be made in collaboration with the child’s therapist, the parents, the social worker and the coordinator. Special focus should be given to ensuring that the meeting does not result in further victimization of the child.

12. If the child’s participation is deemed appropriate, it is important to discuss with them the level of participation that they desire and any discomfort they anticipate about attending the conference. A child, for example, may be ambivalent about participating in all three phases of the conference. Alternatively, they may have concerns about being able to adequately express their thoughts and desires in front of their family. These concerns need to be discussed and solutions sought.

A child may determine that they do not wish to attend the conference and would rather write a letter to be read to their family expressing their thoughts. This is particularly appropriate when a child is truly too young or immature to participate fully. (This is also an appropriate practice when therapists and others feel that a child’s attendance in the conference may cause emotional harm.)

Another way to ensure that a child feels capable and safe is by lining up a support person to attend the meeting with the child. This person’s role is to assist the child in having a voice in the meeting and expressing their thoughts when they feel uncomfortable doing so themselves.

It is important to note that a support person does not assume the role of family member. They do not have a say in the plan nor is it appropriate for them to express their own ideas or solutions. In addition, selection of a support person should be given careful consideration so that the inclusion of this person does not negatively interfere with the natural dynamics of the private family meeting or undermine the family ‘s ability to have an open and honest discussion.

Lastly, a child should be given the option of participating in only a portion of the meeting or to leave the meeting if they become too uncomfortable. It is a good idea to make provisions for this possibility with the child before the meeting occurs so that a plan is in place.
**Including the Parents in the Meeting Planning**

1. Ask the parents who they would like to come to the meeting.

   Generally it is best to begin with family members and ask for their names and phone numbers and then talk about service providers who should be invited. Most of the time, the social worker has already provided a list of potential participants (a complete list of the professionals with perhaps a few family members that they have come across) on the referral form. Hopefully, the parent will offer up those same names without your help plus a few more. If not, offer suggestions. While there are those individuals who must be invited, asking questions in a way that elicits their thoughts and input is very important. (Remember, this is their meeting and it is the coordinator’s job to subtly reinforce that every step of the way.)

2. Occasionally, a parent may literally not have any family members.

   When this is the case, it is appropriate to ask about psychological family members or fictive kin. Those individuals are “like” family to the parent. It is important to keep in mind, however, that some “like” family members, while being very loyal and supportive of the parent, may not feel as protective of the child as may actual family members. Consequently, they may not challenge the parents wishes the same way someone would whose priority is the safety and protection of the child.

3. Talk with the parents about the extent to which they would like fictive kin to participate in the meeting.

   Do they want these “like” family members to participate in the entire meeting and have a say in the private family meeting the same as other family members? Would they prefer that they only participate in the informational portion of the meeting? As previously mentioned, special attention needs to be given to ensuring that fictive kin view their role as ensuring that the child is safe and protected - and do not see themselves as someone to assist a parent in achieving a particular agenda.

4. Ask the parents where they would like the meeting to be held.

   Sometimes parents will suggest a family member’s home. If this truly constitutes a neutral site for all family members and does not create an imbalance in power, this may work. It is not unusual for parents to suggest having the meeting at the DCFS office. It is generally best to discourage that. DCFS offices are often not the most family-friendly places to hold a long meeting and because it’s departmental turf it can undermine the empowerment, which is so important to success. Meeting rooms at community centers, churches, treatment centers, fire stations, etc. seem to work best.

5. Tell the parents the potential meeting dates that have been obtained from the social worker and ask for their availability on those days. Giving participants about three
weeks notice also helps in determining a meeting date.

4. Give the parents and child some choice in the kind of food for the meeting. This contributes to the feeling that this is their meeting.

5. Ask parents (and perhaps elder family members as well) if there is a way that they would like to open and close the meeting. Some examples are a prayer, a moment of silence, a poem or a song.

6. Ask the parents and other family members if they would bring pictures of the children involved to the meeting. This is helpful in setting the tone for a cooperative process that is centered on the best interests of the children.

7. If a child is going to be attending it is important to include them in as much of the planning as possible (regardless of their age). The more they are a part of the planning, the more they are (going to feel comfortable with the process and feel that their opinions matter.
VIII. INVITING EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS AND PROFESSIONALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Inviting and Talking with Family Members

1. Contact family members about attending the meeting.

2. Discuss the purpose of the meeting and how the meeting works. Include a discussion about the three phases.

3. Discuss their decision-making role in the meeting and the importance of their participation.

   Family members will sometimes feel their participation is not important due to the fact that they are not available for placement of the children. In such cases it is important to stress the importance of their ideas (and not whether they are available for placement or for anything else). Talk with them about how the best plans tend to be ones with the most family members in attendance seemingly due to the fact that there are more caring people working on solutions.

   If family members bring up other barriers, it is important to be in a position to offer up solutions to those problems. For example, if a family member indicates that they may be unable to come to the meeting due to childcare issues it is important to be in a position to offer to pay for day care. In reality, it is rare for a family member to take up the coordinators offer, however, offering assistance helps to underscore the importance of their attendance.

4. Let each family member know who else is being invited to the meeting and ask if anyone has been missed. This often elicits the names of more functional family members who can be essential to a good meeting outcome. Other times there is a key professional that for whatever reason had not been previously identified but is an important person to the case. With each new family member or professional identified, you need to go back to the parents regarding that person and gain the parents consent to this person being invited.

5. Ask each participant which of the potential meeting days works for him or her and stress the importance of identifying as many dates as possible.

Inviting and Talking with Professionals and Service Providers

1. Contact each professional and service provider and invite them to the meeting.

2. Discuss with them the meeting format and their role in the meeting.
If a professional will be attending a Family Group Conference for the first time, it is especially important to spend the necessary time to win their support for the model. Respect their expertise and address any concerns they might have. This may be the first time anyone in their agency has heard of the model and it is extremely important that they understand their role in the process.

3. Remind professionals to be straightforward in their presentation, using clear concise language (not jargon), and remind them that the best plans are developed when the family has all of the information available to them.

4. Ask professionals to bring relevant information to help answer questions from family members such as X-rays, photos of the injuries or case notes.

5. Remember to always invite attorneys and Guardians Ad Litem.

   At times the attorneys for the parents can be extremely helpful during the information phase, especially if the family has specific legal questions.

Occasionally, as a coordinator, you may come across an attorney or GAL that is wary of the process and questions whether it will be beneficial for his/her client. When discussing this with an attorney it is helpful to remember that this is not a legal proceeding. The Family Group Conference is a voluntary meeting in which the parents have given their consent. If an attorney is opposed to the family taking on a decision-making role, it is appropriate to ask the attorney to speak with their client and get back to you regarding their stance. It is important to always provide the guardian ad litem or attorney the opportunity to speak at the end of the information phase.

6. Ask each participant which of the potential meeting days works for him or her and stress the importance of identifying as many dates as possible.

7. It is important to remember that often the first contact a coordinator has with professionals and family members is by leaving a message on their voice mail or answering machine. It is helpful if that message consists of a brief explanation of why you are calling along with a listing of the potential meeting days. Ask them when they call back to leave word as to which of the days work for them so even if it takes several days to connect with them directly to talk about the meeting itself you are at least able to begin the scheduling process.
IX. MEETING SET UP AND CONFIRMATION

1. Once a day and time has been settled upon for the meeting, everyone is contacted again and asked to call back and confirm. This seems to help in ensuring their attendance and in helping them to feel that their presence is crucial.

2. Locate and secure a meeting site. If a telephone is required for the meeting, you may want to check out personally if the jack is working and your phone is compatible with facility’s system.

3. A formal list of participants list is developed that includes name, relationship to the case, address, phone number and possible confirmation. A letter and information about family group conferences in general as well as specifics such as time and location should be sent to everyone.

   *It is often helpful to develop this list early on as a working list of potential participants.*

4. When the participant’s list is completed a copy is given to the social worker. Confirmation doesn’t necessarily guarantee attendance. Also, additional people may attend.

5. Reminder letters go out to all participants that include directions to the meeting site and map if needed.

6. The day before of the day of the meeting, groceries are purchased and arrangements are made if a speakerphone needs to be brought to the meeting.

7. The day before the meeting, an outline of the meeting is developed that includes the presentation order, areas that each presenter needs to cover and housekeeping type information for the coordinator to address - including introductions, review of meeting structure, etc. Family members and service providers find an agenda helpful and reassuring.

   Given the confidential nature of the meeting and the chance that some copies of the outline may leave with participants, careful consideration should be given to its contents if it is to be handed out to participants.

8. Remember to bring to the meeting:
   - Releases of information
   - Confidentiality statements for participants to sign
   - The meeting outline
   - Reports or letters to read from participants not in attendance
• a copy of the participant list
• Photographs of the children involved
• a cell phone or pager
• Food and coffee pot
• paper, pens and pencils for the family to take notes and
• Facial tissues
  resource information
X. PREPARING THE SOCIAL WORKER

Preparing the worker for the meeting may be one of the most challenging aspects of preparation, or one of the easiest. It depends upon how well the coordinator knows the social worker and how well the social worker understands the goal of the family group conference. The goal of the meeting is to create an environment and a process, which enables the family to make decision and take ownership of their plan and the “problem”. The tone the social worker communicates can either facilitate this occurring or create an “us and them” power differential that undermines the entire process.

The social worker needs to come to the meeting having reviewed the case file and able to answer questions from the family. This demonstrates respect for the family and for the importance of the work they’re about to do.

Presenting case information in the chronological “just the facts” manner is also very helpful. The social worker should avoid editorializing or judging any of the case events as it may only make the parent (and possibly the family) defensive and argumentative. If the department action was appropriate the facts will speak for themselves. Most family members will agree with the validity of an action taken if they are provided with the reasons behind the decision. Nevertheless, it is often helpful if the social worker uses statements such as “the department filed the dependency petition” as opposed to “I filed the dependency petition” or “the police removed the children” instead of” I (or the department) removed the children”.

The social worker should avoid being directive in regards to the family’s plan unless there are bottom line protection issues that they must address. For a family to take ownership of their plan, (and consequently follow through with it successfully), it must truly be their plan. The social worker should refrain from telling the family what their plan should consist of even when they ask, which they often do. Since the social worker’s traditional role is to come up with solutions, it may be necessary for the coordinator to intervene and stop the worker from answering the question. The family should be told something to the effect “that’s a really good question for all of you to discuss in your private family meeting” - thereby not giving the worker the opportunity to respond and give the family their answer for them.

As the meeting approaches, it is often important to again ask the social worker if there is anything a potential family plan could include that they cannot accept. Between the time the worker made the referral and the meeting itself circumstances may have changed. Being aware of changes and of the possible repercussions could be crucial to ensuring that the family is not blind-sided at the actual meeting.
XI. PREPARATION OF THE MEETING SITE

1. At the meeting site locate the restrooms and access to the outside and inform the participants of their location at the beginning of meeting.

2. Check that there is a phone available and call the cell phone to make sure it is working.

3. Set up chairs in a circle or tables and chairs into a square.
   It is important to not create a top-down atmosphere. If the only table in the room is rectangular it is important for neither the coordinator or the social worker to sit at the head of the table - to do so may create a power differential completely opposite to the one you’re intending.

4. Place pictures of the children around the center of the table so that all participants can see them during the meeting.
   Another possible technique is to hold back the pictures until the end of the information-sharing phase when the coordinator is giving the instructions to the family. During this time the family is reminded that their job is to come up with a plan that will ensure the safety and protection needs of the child - emphasizing that is why everyone is here. Pictures passed around at this point in the meeting can help bring additional focus to this crucial point.

5. Set out food and make coffee.

6. Provide paper and pens/pencils for those who wish to take notes, placing them in the center of the table for individuals to help themselves may be all that’s needed.

7. Remember, the coordinator is neutral to all participants in the meeting, therefore it is important for the coordinator and the social worker not to sit together during the meeting.
XII. MEETING FACILITATION

Phase I of the meeting will generally take from one to two hours depending on the amount of information shared and the number of questions asked by family members. It is the coordinators role to keep the meeting on track and moving and to ensure that family members are provided ample opportunity to ask questions.

Facilitation of the actual meeting is often the easiest part of a coordinators role due to the structure and format of the meeting. However, assertiveness on the part of the coordinator is a must. It is not uncommon for a family to start formulating their plan during this first phase of the meeting or for the meeting to take an argumentative or defensive turn. In either case, it is the coordinator’s job to get the meeting back on track. Simple phrases such as “that’s an important point to discuss in your private family meeting” can come in handy. Sometimes it is important to remind family members that it is not necessary that they agree with all the information shared. In fact, one of their tasks during their private family meeting is to evaluate the information shared and incorporate only what they feel is valid into their plan.

A parent may often disagree with a portion of the information being shared or be in denial about a particular problem. Other members of the family may or may not agree, but they all hear the same information at the same time. The perceived credibility of the professionals providing the information is also crucial. The more family members at the meeting, the more creative the plans tend be and the more assurance the caseworker has that the issues will be addressed.

During the meeting the coordinator follows the outline that was written up prior to the meeting.

Once Phase I is over, the family begins their private family meeting. Before beginning this phase it is important to let the family that the coordinator and the social worker will be in another room in the same building. The family must have the ability to have additional questions answered and to notify you when they are ready to present their plan. It is important that the coordinator and social worker remain together during this time so as to simplify things for the family.

Remember to emphasize to the family that they have use of the room for as long as needed and encourage them to take their time.

Additional instructions to the family will vary from case to case. It is important to stress to the family to be as specific as possible and to answer the “who, what, where, when and how(s)” as much as they can. This will eliminate the need to fill in those blanks later - which if not handled carefully may undermine much of the family empowerment that has thus far occurred. Reiterate the need for consensus on the plan, emphasizing that all
family members have an equal say. If there are any bottom line protection issues, it may be important to reiterate those again at this time. It is also important to remind them that one person, at least, must write down the plan.

Lastly, make sure food is provided. It may be appropriate to make lunch arrangements prior to the meeting so the family can eat lunch or have other refreshments during their private family time.

Once the family has developed their plan and reached consensus, they notify the coordinator and social worker who then return to the room. Occasionally, the parent’s attorneys or GAL may also choose to return at this time. The family presents their plan in its entirety and then it is the social worker’s job to assess the family plan and determine if the plan meets the safety and protection needs of the child. During this phase it may be necessary to “flesh out” aspects of the plan filling in some of those “who, what, where, when and how(s)”. It is the coordinator’s responsibility to assess the best way of doing this. It may be decided to leave the family alone for a few minutes to address the issues in private or it may be deemed more empowering to do this collaboratively with the family. Some families take firm ownership of their plan and to do anything collaboratively would undermine this feeling of ownership and power. On the other hand, asking other families to reconvene their private family meeting may make them feel that they had not done their job correctly the first time. Therefore it is the coordinator’s job to determine the best way to ensure that the feeling of empowerment is not jeopardized during this phase.

Nevertheless, it may be helpful to ask families if it would be helpful to set up a means to review the plan. This may be in the form of a follow up meeting or it may be in the form of selecting a contact person within the family who serves as a liaison between the family and the social worker - or both. Tightening up timelines for implementation of the plan may also be appropriate.

Once the plan has been presented and accepted the meeting is adjourned. The coordinator’s next responsibility is to type up the family’s plan and send a copy to all that attended the meeting. It is also helpful to attach a copy of the family’s notes. If the court is involved in the case it is the social worker’s responsibility to incorporate the plan into the next proposed court order.
XIII. POST MEETING TASKS

1. Type up the family’s plan being sure to include:
   • The date of the meeting
   • A listing of all participants (family members with their name and relationship to the child; professionals with name, agency and role)
   • any reports or letters read or provided to the family from a professional or family member not in attendance
   • if a parent is not in attendance at the meeting make it clear and that their support of the plan is not known. An example may be:
     “Both parents were notified of the meeting via their last known address and through their attorneys. Neither parent attended the meeting. Consequently, the parent’s thoughts/stance regarding the plan developed is not known.”
   • The services and responsibilities outline the family’s plan should be written in a manner that clearly states how the plan is to be carried out and can be easily utilized with court reports. When the coordinator does this, a statement should be added to the effect: “Prepared by...(coordinator’s name).

2. Send a copy of the plan along with a thank you letter to all participants.

3. If a follow up meeting is a part of the plan, mark your calendar one month before a follow up meeting is to occur as a tickler to schedule the meeting.

4. Send a thank you letter to the meeting site thanking them for the use of their facility.

5. It is important to track the number of Family Group Conferences completed as well as the outcomes. This information can be crucial to finding out if a meeting is successful in the long run and in locating the pitfalls.

6. For more information about state tracking procedures, contact Pat Wulf, FGC Program Manager, email: wupa300@dshs.wa.gov.
Appendix A

Family Group Conference
Case Summaries
Case Example #1

A three year old child was removed from her parents due to drug/alcohol related neglect and had been residing in relative care for close to two years at the time of the Family Group Conference referral. The child was placed with her maternal aunt and uncle who resided in King County. Case responsibility, however, continued with the county where the case originated.

During the two years of departmental involvement, the parents moved many times and from county to county. They kept in poor contact with the department and only participated minimally in court-ordered services. In addition, the social worker changed numerous times, with no one worker carrying the case for any period of time. Ten months prior to the Family Group Conference, the court ordered concurrent planning. A petition for termination of parental rights had not been filed, however.

In the months prior to the conference, the office with jurisdiction was interested in having the entire case transferred to King County due to the location of the child. King County, however, was unwilling to accept the case due to concern that with the reassignment of attorneys and GAL (in addition to a significant back log within the King County court system) case resolution would likely be delayed another two years. King County did, however, agree to provide courtesy supervision and facilitate a Family Group Conference.

The courtesy supervision worker made a referral for a Family Group Conference. Both parents were agreeable to the meeting. The mother, however, indicated that she was aware that her sister thought the plan should be relative adoption and made it clear that she was not in agreement with that plan. She indicated that she wished to pursue reunification and that she was now ready to pursue whatever services the court required of her. The father’s stance was not known. All parties felt there was little likelihood that the family could come to any sort of an agreement. There was some indication, however, that the mother may not be as opposed to alternative planning as she stated. As such, the assigned worker brought relinquishment papers with her to the meeting to have on hand in case the family determined that relinquishment/adoPTION was their plan of choice.

At the Family Group Conference, the case history was provided by the assigned caseworker and supplemented by the courtesy supervision worker. Both social workers talked about permanency planning and the child’s need to know where she was going to be raised. This line of discussion was furthered by the child’s therapist who spoke of the effect a “limbo status” had on a child and how it manifested itself specifically with this child. None of the professionals, however, hinted at what the family plan should or should not be - allowing it to be entirely up to the family to determine what course of action would be in the best interests of the child.

The family met in private for approximately 2 1/2 hours. In the end, all family members decided that it was in the best interests of the child for her to be adopted by the maternal
aunt and uncle. Their plan included an agreement allowing for continued contact between the parents, the paternal grandparents and the child. At the conclusion of the meeting the parents signed relinquishment papers.

Case Example #2

Police responded to a call regarding a disturbance at a motel. Four children were found dirty and not having eaten for 24 hours. The mother was arrested for prostitution and loitering. When she was released from jail the mother had no place to live and consequently signed a Voluntary Placement Agreement allowing the children to remain in the responsible adult placement made previously by the police. When the caretaker indicated he could no longer care for the children and the mother could not be located, a Dependency was filed.

Further investigation revealed possible drug/alcohol abuse, as well as, a history of domestic violence and sexual abuse of the children by one of the mother’s former boyfriends.

At the time of the Family Group Conference the children had been in foster care for 1 1/2 years. The eldest child was now seven years of age, the second child was five and the twins were three. Due to severe acting out behavior the children were placed and replaced on several occasions with the children spread over three different homes at the time of the meeting. None of the placements had the possibility of permanence.

The mother participated intermittently in visitation with her children but had yet to engage in court-ordered services when she left Washington State and moved back to Des Moines, Iowa. The mother had been raised in Des Moines and her family continued to reside there. As such, the coordinator and caseworker traveled to Iowa where the Family Group Conference took place in one of the relative’s homes. The meeting was attended by nineteen of the mother’s relatives. (The whereabouts of both fathers were unknown.)

The family plan included placement of three of the children with one relative and one child with a second relative who lived a short distance away. The plan included a family respite plan, outside counseling services and supportive services provided by many of the other family members (including laundry services for younger children suffering from enuresis.)

The family was aware that with the exception of the eldest child, the children would not remember them. Consequently, they were concerned that the move would be upsetting to the children if not handled carefully. As such, the family decided to make a video introducing themselves to the children and welcoming them into their lives. Each child was presented with their own copy of the video which they reportedly watched numerous times prior to the move.
An agreed guardianship was signed into place six months following placement and the case was closed.

**Case Example #3**

A child (age nine) was removed from her mother’s care due to drug/alcohol related neglect and placed with her maternal aunt and uncle on a Voluntary Placement Agreement. The case was referred for a Family Group Conference in order to see if the family could come up with a plan that might avoid the filing of a Dependency.

At the conference the family concluded that reunification with the mother was not appropriate at that time and concluded that a 3rd Party Custody Agreement through Family Court would be the best way to provide the necessary legal structure to the child’s placement.

The family also used the meeting as a forum to confront the mother about the seriousness of her drug/alcohol problem. The mother had previously participated in several short-term inpatient and outpatient treatment programs without success. As a result of the family’s intervention, the mother agreed to enter long-term inpatient drug/alcohol treatment. A plan for regular visitation between mother and child was developed, as well as, a plan for eventual reunification. The family plan also included mental health counseling for the child, as well as, a continuation of counseling for the relative caretakers around parenting issues.

The social worker agreed to not pursue Dependency and instead close her case once the 3rd Party Custody Agreement was in place feeling assured that the family would now always protect the child.

**Case Example #4**

This case was originally referred as a Family Support Meeting (a two hour collaborative meeting based on Oregon’s Family Unity Model which would bring both family and professionals to the table for problem-solving). The case was re-referred for a Family Group Conference due to the large number of family members interested in attending the meeting. (There was concern that a two hour meeting would not allow ample opportunity for all family members to truly participate and contribute ideas/solutions.)

The immediate family consisted of the two parents and their four children (ages ranging from 4 to 15 years). Most recently, CPS became involved due to allegations of physical abuse. There were previous referrals, however, alleging that the children were coming to school without proper clothing, that the children suffered health problems due to inadequate nutrition, etc. The eldest child was hanging around with an inappropriate peer group involved in drugs, alcohol and sex. A home based services provider had been working with the family for several months and services were soon to end. The parents
had complied with all requests made by the Department and home-based services worker. It was felt, however, that without fairly significant extended family support the CPS referrals would continue -- ultimately resulting in the removal of the children.

Both parents were developmentally delayed (and many of the problems the family was having appeared to stem from this issue). Both maternal grandparents were hearing impaired. The father was of Filipino descent and with a large extended family. Unfortunately, both sides of the family were to a large degree unaware of the problems that the parents were experiencing.

The meeting was attended by 25 people with 17 family members. Prior to the meeting three of the family members took it upon themselves to put together a notebook of information for each of the family members. The notebook included information pertaining to each child’s education, medical and dental information, information on SSI, the welfare office, DDD, etc. In addition, the notebooks included contact people and telephone numbers. The Department located the meeting site and facilitated the meeting, however, the family chose to take it upon themselves to provide lunch and snacks for all attendees. The meeting lasted from 9:30 in the morning until 6:00 in the evening. At that point the family was still not completely finished and consequently, the family met for another 3 hours the following week.

The family’s plan consisted of first identifying all the areas where the parents needed assistance. The second part of their plan assigned a family member to each of the tasks identified. The family’s goal was to keep the family intact and to assist the parent’s in successfully parenting their children.
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES
DIVISION OF CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES
Smokey Point Office, 3906- 172 St. NE, I/200, P0 Box 3409, Arlington, WA 98223

02/19/02

TO: Family and Friends

RE: SAPORTE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

Dear Lisa:

This is an invitation to the Family Conference for Brandon. The family conference is scheduled for February 7th at 1:00. We will meet at Smokey Point Community Center, 17721 Smokey Pt. Blvd., Bldg. B (A map is enclosed). This is an opportunity for family members to work together to make placement and safety plans for Brandon. Meetings usually last three to four hours, so lunch and other refreshments will be provided. Mileage can also be paid.

The first part of the Family Conference is Information Sharing. The social worker and any one working with Brandon will talk about how he is doing. They will focus on positives, but also talk about concerns. Information about the parent’s services and supports for the children and any placement and the Dependency Court system will be provided. It is important for everyone to hear all the information at the same time and have a chance to ask questions.

During the second part of the meeting, the family meets alone to make plans for Brandon. Because Brandon is 14 he can join you in this discussion. You can talk about where you think he should live, the legal plan, services and supports for both Brandon and the placement and anything else you think is important. After you complete the plan, you review it with the social worker to make sure everyone understands and agrees.

Please call, if you have questions. My telephone number is 360-600-0000. I have included a brochure that provides more information on family group conferences.

Sincerely,

Judith Wirth, Program Manager Region 3
Family Group Conference Coordinator
June 3, 1997

Geraldine SaPorte
P0 Box 000
Hometown, USA 00000

RE: SaPorte Family Group Conference
Dear Geraldine,

This letter is to remind you of the Family Group Conference scheduled for February 7th at 1:00 PM. The meeting will be held at the “great room” at Catholic Community Services in Seattle.

Catholic Community Services is located at: 100 23rd Ave. South
Seattle, WA

Directions:
From I-5
Take the James St. exit and head east on James St. (up the hill)
(James St. will become Cherry St.)
Turn right onto 23rd Ave. South
Travel approximately five blocks
Catholic Community Services is located at 23rd and Yesler.

Enclosed is a map to the meeting site.

I want to thank you in advance for your participation. Your input and ideas will be instrumental to making this meeting a success. If you are unable to attend, please call me at 000 so I can obtain your ideas and recommendations in writing or over the phone. Due to the number of people coming attending the meeting will be starting promptly at 9:30AM.

I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely

Ida Planner, MSW
Family Group Conference Coordinator/Facilitator
02/19/02

TO: Richard Lee, Attorney 777 Blank St.
    Seattle, WA 98000

RE: SAPORTE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

Dear Mr. Lee:

This is an invitation to a Family Group Conference for Ronda SaPorte and her two older children. Your office represents Ronda in Dependency Court. The conference is Scheduled for Thursday February 7th at 1:00. We will meet at Smokey Point Community Center, 17721 Spokane Street. The legal part of the discussion is usually near the end of the agenda, although you can do your presentation earlier, if you need to. As you know, family members usually have a number of questions about Dependency Court, permanency planning timelines, etc.

The first part of the Family Conference is the Information Sharing Phase. It is important for everyone in the family to hear all the information and have a chance to ask questions. You will need to explain your role as a court appointed attorney, discuss the legal status of the case and answer the family’s questions about legal options etc. The first part of the meeting will probably last about an hour. You may stay for the duration of the meeting or you may leave after your presentation.

Please call me and let me know if you are able to attend the meeting, and what time would work best for you. My phone number is (000) 000-0000. Thanks again for caring about children and families.

Sincerely,

Judith Wirth, Program Manager, Region 3
Family Group Conference Coordinator
Appendix E

Facilitation Tools
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### CONTACTS – PROFESSIONALS and SERVICE PROVIDERS

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SAMPLE: FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE AGENDA

THANK YOU - for taking the time to be here today to develop a plan for Billy Smith and any relative that cares for him. Your job today is to determine a plan that will keep Billy and the other children in the family safe, and a plan that will be in his best interests, now and in the future. Children need the love and support of everyone in the family; they also need stability in their lives. You, as a family have some difficult and emotional decisions to make. Remember to keep focused on what is best for the children. This is your opportunity, as a family, to develop plans for Billy that will keep him safe and avoid further DSHS involvement.

GENERAL INTRODUCTIONS

This is a voluntary program. I want to thank mother and Billy’s guardian for agreeing to participate in this family meeting.

RELEASES of Information and Discussion of Confidentiality

PURPOSE: Your job today is to make a plan that will keep the children safe and will be in their best interest, now and in the future. We will talk about our concerns and your concerns. We want everyone to hear the same information and ask questions.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

1. Information Sharing - DCFS SW’s and Service providers present information. Your job is to ask questions and understand the information. The CPS allegations and risk factors will be reviewed, but the focus will be on the present and on planning for the future.

2. Family Phase. Meet for as long as necessary. Write down the family plan.

3. Presentation Plan. Present plan to social worker for discussion and approval.

The plan must meet the protection and safety needs of the children

INFORMATION SHARING AGENDA

1. CPS Social Worker
   * Explain why you made the referral for a FGC.
   * Discussion of risk factors. CPS history. Why CPS got involved.
   * Discussion of both strengths and concerns regarding the family.
   * Legal status of the case with DSHS.
   * Bottom line safety issues that would affect a plan.

2. Tribal ICW Social Worker
   * Legal status of the case with Tribal ICW services.
   * Discuss work with Billy and the family.
   * What have they been working on? What are the concerns and strengths?
*Any services she would recommend?
*What kind of services can the Tribe provide?

3. Tribal Police
*Describe their role in working with Billy.
*What is their role in working with victims of sex abuse?
*What are the concerns?
*What kind of recommendations would they make for Billy, family members etc?

4. Principal Middle School
*How is Billy doing at school?
*Has this changed this year?
*What are strengths and what are concerns?
*What kinds of services would she recommend? What can the school do?

5. Therapist for Billy
*Report and recommendations.

6. Social worker
*Discussion of treatment for Sexually Aggressive Youth.
*Review of some guidelines for supervision.
*Recommendations regarding services and supports for caretakers.

7. DISCUSSIONS OF LEGAL OPTIONS & SERVICES, PERMANENCY PLANNING GUIDELINES.

QUESTIONS FROM FAMILY???

1. FAMILY PHASE:

2. ISSUES/CONCERNS THE FAMILY MAY WISH TO DISCUSS:
*Placement - where will the children live?
*If the children move, how would this happen? When would it happen?
*Who can transport? What about visitation? Do visits need to be supervised?
*Contacts with family members. How will they happen, when, with whom?
*If parents and children need services, what should they be?
*How can family members support and protect the children as well as the parents?

*WHAT IS IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILDREN?
Appendix F

Forms
FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE
INTAKE FORM

Date: 
Social Worker: Phone 
Supervisor: 
CPS Social Worker: Phone: 

Client Information

(1) Parent Name: Phone: 
Address: 

(2) Parent Name: Phone: 
Address: 

(3) Other: Phone: 
Address: 

Case#: 
Court Involvement? [ ] Yes [ ] No 
Ethnicity: If Native American, Tribal Affiliation________________________ 
Involvement of Tribe (How active is tribe in case planning?): _______________________

Children: Placement: 
Name: DOB/AGE Sex Name: 
Address: Phone: 
Name: DOB/AGE Sex Name: 
Address: Phone: 
Name: DOB/AGE Sex Name: 
Address: Phone: 
Name: DOB/AGE Sex Name: 
Address: Phone: 

Extended family members (as known), and/or attach Relative Search form. 
Name Relationship Phone 
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Service Providers involved with the family:

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Attorneys and GAL

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<td>Social Worker’s Attorney</td>
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Other pertinent professionals such as someone to talk about drug/alcohol issues and services available.

Have you discussed this referral with your supervisor?

Brief Summary of the Case (i.e., why is the state involved, what are the concerns/issues, what is the assessed risk of CAN, copy of latest ISSP if available) and what the bottom line safety issues are.
Family Group Conference related transportation expenses can be reimbursed when the transportation is approved by the child’s social worker. Transportation expenses are reimbursable if they do one of the following:

1. Consistent the plan
2. Supports a permanent plan
3. Directly prevents a foster/group placement
4. Is not payable by another resource

Please complete the following and return to the FGC Coordinator

NAME_________________________ DOB:_______________________ Soc. Sec#___________

CHILD’S NAME_______________________

SOCIAL WORKER’S NAME_______________________

FGC COORDINATOR NAME:_______________________

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Social Worker Presentation
(General Guide)

As the first one to present case information at the Family Group Conference, your role is key in many respects. The following is a general guide to assist you in your presentation.

Areas to include in your presentation:

• Why referral for meeting
• Expected benefits
• What initiated CPS involvement
• Summary of allegations/results of investigation
• Legal action taken
• Current legal status
• Services offered/provided parents
• Compliance/progress made by parents
• Placement situation
• Services offered or provided placement
• Need for permanent planning/case resolution

It is important to relay case facts in a chronological, neutral tone void of judgment or editorializing. Even the most sensitive and controversial information has a very good chance of being accepted by family members and parents alike if the information is shared in a clear, concise, honest and sensitive manner that makes a point of including what the parents are doing right.

You should keep in mind that as the first presenter at the meeting you are setting a tone for the remainder of the meeting and for the rest of the presenter. If your presentation minimizes issues or glosses over important information, it can be expected that the other presenters will follow suit. As a result, the family may not know vital information and their plan may not include all the necessary safeguards for the child.
Along the same lines, if your presentation has an adversarial or judgmental tone, the family will respond defensively and have a difficult time putting aside their anger to focus on the best interests of the child. The meeting will become “us against them” and it will be difficult to agree on anything. In addition, the validity (and genuineness) of the information you provide may be brought, into question.

Selective editing around case events should also be avoided. If the department action was appropriate the facts will speak for themselves. Most family members will agree with the validity of an action taken if they are provided with the reasons behind the decision. The family needs a complete representation of the facts if they are going to be in a position to do good planning.

Professional jargon should also be explained or (preferably) avoided. Often family members are hesitant to ask for clarification or for the meaning of a particular word. Needless to say, if the family does not completely understand the issues, they are going to be ill equipped when it comes to resolving the problem.

Equally important is to avoid being directive in regards to the family plan. For a family to take ownership of their plan, it must truly be their plan. Consequently, it is important to refrain from telling the family what their plan should include even when the family is asking - which they often do. The caseworker can (and should) express the “concerns” of the Department but should leave it to the family how to address those concerns.

It is often helpful to use statements such as “the department filed the dependency petition” as opposed to “I filed the dependency petition” or “the police removed the children” instead of “I (or the department) removed the children”. This helps to depersonalize and objectify the information shared, allowing you to come across in a more neutral manner.

Lastly, because your role is so pivotal, it is important to come to the meeting well prepared. For most workers this means writing a case outline prior to the meeting. For those uncomfortable with public speaking, it may mean writing out your presentation in its entirety, and then reading it to the family. Proper preparation ensures that none of the information is inadvertently missed, and is also a concrete indicator to the family the value you are placing on them and their role in the meeting.
Resource Material
For Additional Resource Material, contact
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